



Dr John's parenting tips

Ages and Stages of Learning

Parenting is the most important job we'll ever do and yet children come without a manual – or a money-back option! This parent guide is an extract from Dr John Irvines' book "Who'd be a parent? The manual that should have come with the kids!" Dr John Irvine is one of Australia's most heard and read child psychologists.

If we understand how kids learn behaviour then we can work out effective ways of changing their behaviour.

Here are some guidelines on how children's behaviour is modified.

BABIES

Babies learn by sense and feel. Cuddling, talking, holding, stroking, singing, praising all register and will reinforce whatever behaviour preceded it. If a reward meets a child's need at that time it will reinforce the commitment to the person who initiated it. On the other hand, a sharp no, no attention, a sad face, a stern voice or a hairy eyebrow will weaken that behaviour.

TODDLERS

This special little period is a testing one for parents because children are finding their own ego. They quickly learn to do those behaviours that feed their ego and not do those that don't and this is why they will deliberately repeat annoying actions – the negative attention makes them feel powerful and independent. They will deliberately not do poos on demand or eat on demand because that puts them in control.

TWO TO FOUR

This is the egocentric learner in full flight. They can now store memories and images in their minds, so they like to role-play, act out, act powerful, experiment, test and generally just check out how powerful this new creature really is. The terrible twos are the result of this need to ego-satisfy and many parents mistakenly believe that their child is personally rejecting them.

Because of their inflated ego they respond to being told how big they're getting and how good they're getting. This can also work to your advantage because every time you reward them for doing the right thing, it makes them feel good, up jumps their ego and they'll do more of it – not out of love for you, but out of love for themselves! At this stage anything involving their ego or their imagination will work wonders. But their world is immediate, so if they're to be rewarded or punished it must be as close as possible to the action so they link the two together. Waiting is one of the things they need to learn but start it in small chunks they understand, eg when the oven timer goes.

FIVE AND SIX

These kids still have their lovely imagination but their ego has settled and they're now keen to make others feel good. If you capitalise on their thirst to be told they're good then you can develop the most adorable kids. Their behaviour can be reinforced even by abstract symbols of parental approval, such as star and charts and their behaviour can be shaped by consistently reinforcing behaviour you want and consistently punishing behaviour you don't. Because they believe in their world, things that shatter that faith hurt hard. If a dog is nasty to them or somebody hurts them then they can wear the scars for a long time.

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SEVEN TO ELEVEN

This is the age at which kids start to think logically, so logical natural consequences are the best teacher. It's also the age at which their brains can handle add-ups and takeaways, and where they can see things from other points of view. Reasoning can be used to some effect, but bear in mind that their reasoning may not agree with yours. As they get older and their mind starts to manage their behaviour, so the management of their behaviour has to make sense to their mind. Their mind has to be engaged with reality-type choices and options, eg 'if you help me then I'll have time to read you a story, but if you don't then we won't be able to'. Charts are still useful but at this stage a significant shift is occurring; what parents say matters less and less, what their mates say or think matters more and more. Rewards and punishments that take into account that they have a capable brain that needs respect and which acknowledges their peer approval need will be most effective.

Because they have good logical brains, they can be involved in setting up the rules. Involve them, consult them and respect them, and deliver logical consequences, good or bad depending on how they've handled their own rules. It's very hard for kids to disobey their own rules.

TEENAGERS

Physically, socially, sexually and psychologically the teenage years are a time of enormous change. Parents tend to get left way behind as a reference group as teens struggle to find their life membership with their peer group. This means behaviour, attitudes, values and clothes must pay homage to peer values which more often than not clash with parents'. Children see themselves as young adults and the old management techniques of power, control and coercion no longer work. At this age their management has to respect their self-image as young adults and must involve communication, negotiation, respect, responsibility, trust and all the other principles we would use with other adults. It does not mean that parents should just give up or give in. Teenagers are adaptable and can adapt to our values and standards if these are seen as being consistent, authentic and which we stand for rather than making them bow down to.